

Moving the Ladder

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At the Opening Eucharist of the 22nd Annual Conference
of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes

All Saints Episcopal Church, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
March 1, 2007

Welcome to this wonderful place that we call Southeast Florida. We hope that you will enjoy all of the wonderful things that you can do here in winter. None of them will require heaters, thermal underwear, or snow blowers.

I am indeed very fortunate to be the bishop of this tropical diocese that covers Southeast Florida from Key West in the south all the way to Hutchinson Island in the north. Sandwiched in between we have glamorous places like Islamorada, Ocean Reef, South Beach, Miami, Ft. Lauderdale Beach, Boca Raton, Palm Beach and Hobe Sound. It is a rough job but somebody has to do it.

But of course we are not perfect. This is the area, if you recall, that brought you all the excitement of the hanging chads and the little Cuban boy Elian Gonzalez that Janet Reno sent back to Castro at gun point; you are now in the place that OJ chose to live with all of his unused cutlery; and of course just a few days before you arrived we were able to come up with a crazy crying taxi-driver judge, and also a plethora of paternity suits and DNA testing. Actually I am one of the few men at this time who doesn't claim to be the biological father of Anna Nicole's baby daughter.

But I must warn you that before you quit your jobs and decide to rush down here to enjoy all the excitement of Southeast Florida, you have to be aware that this is also the area where hurricanes love to visit.

But enough talk of Southeast Florida. I want to talk to you about a ladder—a particular ladder. This ladder is found in the Holy Land. If you look at any photograph or drawing of the front of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, as far back as 1840, you will notice a ladder placed there on the window ledge a little bit to the right of the church.

My wife Diana and I just returned from our 8th pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how wonderful this experience is. But in all of my previous visits I never noticed the ladder. I asked a Christian Palestinian friend why the ladder was there. He smiled and began to tell me the story.

He claimed that there are several versions of why it is there. The ladder is part of the "Status Quo" and it has to remain there; even when it rots it has to be replaced with another wooden ladder. Nothing can be changed, even if there is no need for a ladder anymore.

His version said that the ladder was first introduced during the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Because the Muslim Turks taxed Christian clergy every time they left and entered the Holy Sepulcher church, the clergy who served the church went out as rarely as possible and eventually set up living quarters in the Holy Sepulcher church.

The window, ladder and ledge all belong to the Armenian Orthodox Church. The ledge served as a balcony for the Armenian clergy. It was their only opportunity to get fresh air and sunshine without paying the Turkish Muslim tax. Some said that they even grew fresh vegetables on the ledge.

In 1937 after an earthquake in Jerusalem an Armenian monk came down the ladder and began to clean the debris that had fallen on the ledge. In order to move the rubble he had to move the ladder and by doing so he violated the Status Quo that came from a *firman* or edict issued by the Ottoman Sultan in 1757 and reaffirmed in 1852. That edict defined the rights of the different Christian denominations that share that church.

The consequences of moving the ladder were that major turmoil took place, because the Greek Orthodox could not fathom anyone making any changes for whatever reason--even if it made sense. The end result was that the Armenian monk was attacked, and since then no one has dared to move the ladder.

Actually that has not been the only major fight to take place in that holy temple. More recently--in the summer of 2002--a Coptic Monk who is stationed on the roof of the church to guard the Coptic claims to the Ethiopian part of the roof dared to move his chair from its agreed spot in the sun into the shade. This of course was seen by the Ethiopian Orthodox as an invasion of property. The end result, the Jerusalem police tell us, is that eleven monks, both Coptic Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox, ended up in the hospital after the resulting fracas.

In September of 2004 another major fight occurred when a Franciscan Roman Catholic monk refused to close the door of the Roman chapel at the request of the Greek Patriarch Irenaus, who was leading a procession to commemorate the Blessed Cross of Christ. As he passed by in front of the Roman Catholic area he asked a Franciscan monk to close the door of the Roman chapel. I imagine that he preferred not to see any of the Latin decorations of the Chapel. The result of this ecumenical encounter, according to the Jerusalem police, is that four Greek monks were arrested, and a Franciscan monk required medical attention because he was bodily attacked by the Orthodox.

Probably you know other shameful stories of how badly Christians get along with each other, not only in the Holy Land but also around the world. Luckily for us as Anglicans, we don't have to worry about that. Or do we?

Well, yes, we do, and that is why I want to talk about that ladder, or should I say the need to move our ladder.

It seems that we Episcopalians have been moving the Anglican ladder too much. It probably started when we elected our first bishop in America. We sent him to the Mother Church and he was refused consecration by Canterbury because he was unable to pledge allegiance to the British King--whom we had just managed to defeat. So actually it was our first bishop who moved the ladder in rebellion when he went to the Jacobites in Scotland for consecration.

Our Episcopal Church and our particular polity were not established during the colonial period; but instead when our church was founded in a free America over 200 years ago, we also came up with a peculiar polity, different from that of the Church of England. We moved the ladder when we made those changes. We eliminated anything that even *smelled* like an Archbishop, and managed to remove part of the imperial power of the bishops.

We even decided to share that power with the presbyters and the laity and came up with something that we call today the House of Deputies. No official decision can be made in this church without them.

I began to think of how many other times we moved the ladder. Was it when we allowed birth control, or decided not let the mother die during childbirth in order to save the baby? Or was it when we allowed divorced Episcopalians to remarry in the church?

Let me see--what else? Oh yes, women's ordination. I was there in 1976 when we moved the ladder again, and voted in Minneapolis to approve the ordination of women to the presbyterate and the episcopacy.

Of course at the same time we up the ante a little more by also changing our Prayer Book to reflect modern English as it was spoken in America during the 20th Century.

It looks as if we have been moving the ladder for a long time. It just happens that we are what we are. It's not easy for others from far away to understand who we are. We are what we are. We were not formed because we were a colony of England that handed over sovereignty. We came to be Episcopalians precisely because we spent years and shed lots of blood fighting the British.

Everything has a consequence, and moving the ladder makes people crazy. I know that very well, because when I voted with the majority of our church to consent to the consecration of the bishop of New Hampshire I was the recipient of considerable irrational behavior. I was aware that there were going to be some in my diocese that were not going to agree with me, but I never expected the angry, bitter and almost irrational reaction of some people who love to call themselves orthodox.

Let me tell you what happened. When I was the bishop of Honduras, where I served as bishop for 17 years, my wife Diana responded to the need of little girls for a safe shelter by starting a home for abandoned, abused and orphaned girls that today houses and educates over 75 girls. It also now includes a school with over 200 students and a clinic to help the indigent of Honduras. Two of those girls have graduated from the university; we have 14 girls currently studying in the university and over 20 in high school.

But to my amazement, after the General Convention of 2003 we began to receive angry letters and cancellations of sponsorships from different parts of this country. These former supporters explained that the cancellation of their sponsorships was because Diana, the director of the home, was married to this horrible bishop who had voted to give his consent in Minneapolis.

Our Little Roses, a home for abandoned, orphaned and abused girls, a ministry that is not even in my diocese but in Central America, was deprived of over \$60,000 in annual sponsorships by angry and irrational people that were willing to hurt and starve the girls in order somehow to hurt me.

I find this amazing, because those beautiful Honduran girls may know who George Clooney or Brad Pitt are, but I am sure that they don't have the foggiest idea of who Gene Robinson is.

The girls suffered because of this irrational and inhuman reaction. Since then we have recovered some of the loss, because other people gave us a hand—people like the parishioners at All Saints, Ft. Lauderdale, including their Integrity Chapter.

We still need help, so if you happen to have some money around to support the abused, abandoned and orphaned girls of Our Little Roses in Honduras, please give us a hand.

If you need more information, talk to me or to Diana. The girls need your help. We will be around today and tomorrow, or you can search the web-- www.ourlittleroses.org has all the information. I partially apologize for begging for the orphans, but those girls need our help and I couldn't resist the opportunity for a commercial. Now let me get back to the ladder.

We have been told not to move the ladder. I think the message has come to us loud and clear.

We are all aware that we have recently received directives from a communiqué that apparently requests from us that we be a different Episcopal Church. The problem I see as an Episcopalian in America is that they are asking us to look to Leviticus 20, which informs us whom to stone, and not to Leviticus 19, which informs us whom to love.

Now, I do not want for you to get the wrong impression. You are not in a liberal diocese. I am not a liberal bishop.

Ethnically and by birth I am a Third World bishop. It has been six and a half years since I arrived to Southeast Florida from a Third World diocese in Central America, where I served for almost two decades. I was also born in the Third World, in a country that the United States has tried to defeat for years, but has been unable to succeed because of the bad aim of the CIA. But this American church decided to move the ladder one more time, and now this Cuban refugee boy also happens to be the bishop of Southeast Florida. As Ricky Ricardo used to say to Lucy, "Honey, I'm home."

This is now my home, and you are in a diocese that has been in complete compliance with the directives of the Windsor Report even before it occurred to the Primates to prepare it.

Now this is also a diocese that recognizes that because of our policies we are discriminating by forbidding the participation of all the baptized in the ordained ministry. We recognize that we can bless dogs and cats, cars and all kinds of boats, homes and businesses, but we have to refrain from blessing our faithful believers in Christ that have lived a monogamous respectable life for decades but happen to be of a different sexual orientation.

We do this not because of the demands of foreign prelates, but because we believe that it is not allowed by General Convention of our Episcopal Church.

In past years we have continued our conversation about these concerns, and many in our midst have worked hard for our General Convention eventually to allow the full inclusion of all the baptized members into its leadership, and to give its blessing to all of its members. And now it seems to me that some want us to stop discussing and to stop thinking.

We are supposed to find ways to ignore all the new evidence of science, and we have to show partiality with our sisters and brothers of different sexual orientations with whom we share this church--to inform them that they have to continue being second class Episcopalians.

I fervently pray that we may continue in the Anglican Communion, but I want to continue in it as an Episcopalian.

I am committed to continue being part of the Anglican Communion, but I also want you to know that I am faithful to this Church that was God's instrument to bring me to Christ and whose form of government was established more than two centuries ago.

I want to continue being a faithful member of this church that for centuries has been sending and keeps sending prayers, financial resources and missionaries to all parts of the world in order to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. We are part of a church that has brought Christ to the world, including some of the areas that today point an accusing finger at us.

I firmly believe that if our founders more than 200 years ago wanted to have the same church polity as other parts of the Communion where presbyters and laity don't have an equal voice with bishops, then they would have chosen to move to Canada or the UK and join those who opposed our justice and independence.

I don't know how the House of Bishops will respond later this month when we meet in Texas. I for one will support my Presiding Bishop.

Gosh I forgot that! A woman Primate--that's another time when we moved the ladder!

Roman Bishops say that they back the Holy Father; well, as an Episcopal Bishop I say that I back the Holy Mother.

It is my fervent prayer that we can find the way towards reconciliation. I am willing to make the necessary sacrifices in all humility, but I hope that the rest of the Communion will respect who we are as Episcopalians.

I pray that whatever we do will be seen with pleasure in the eyes of Jesus Christ, the Christ that loves and cares for all and also calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We are Christians, yes we are.

We are Anglicans, yes we are.

But we are also Episcopalians, and yes we are what we are.

I want to end with the words of the German singer Paul Van Dyk, who expresses his sentiments in his song *Wir Sind Wir* (We are what we are):

We're what we are
 We're standing here
 We're not going down
 No time to be angry
 We're what we are
 We're standing here

We're what we are
 Divided, defeated and else
 But finally, we still exist!

We're what we are
 We will get over it
 Because life has to go on
 We're what we are.
 This is just a bad phase
 We will never give up!

Amen.